

Maritime Underpinnings of Colonial “New Bedford”

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Abstract

Long-standing family relations in England in the foundation and management of the East India Company, particularly between the Howland and Russell families of Bedfordshire, came to be mirrored in the colonial settlement of the Old Dartmouth region in southeastern Massachusetts, and subsequently, in the business structures of the later whale fishery from the port of New Bedford, MA.

In 1822 New York shipbuilders David Brown and Jacob Bell built the ship *John Wells* for the Red Star Packet Line. Founded by flour and grain merchants Thomas S. Byrnes, George T. Trimble, and Silas Wood in 1818, the Red Star Packet Line, also known as the “New Line,” or the “Second Line,” followed the Black Ball line in regular service between New York and Liverpool. At 107 feet long and 366 tons, the *John Wells* was quite a typical merchantman. The Newark Whaling Company owners later bought her for the whale fishery and for her first three voyages, 1835-1844, she was under the command of Captain Uriah Russell (1803-1859) of Nantucket.¹ Thomas Knowles and Company of New Bedford bought her in 1850, and she went on to have a long career in the New Bedford fleet, finally being wrecked on the North Slope of Alaska along with thirty-one other vessels in 1871.

The *John Wells* is really only important because of her name. John Wells (1770-1823), “the Pride of the New York Bar,” and a friend of Governor DeWitt Clinton, very popular when he lived, was a famous lawyer from Brooklyn contemporaneous with the building of the ship. Another, much earlier, John Wells (1662-1702), however, was a London shipbuilder on the Thames River and the designer of the Howland Great Wet Dock in the parish of Rotherhithe. Built between 1697 and 1700, this dock, covering 10 acres, was the largest such facility on the Thames. It could accommodate the largest of East Indiamen, ships as large as 600 tons, and was equipped for all stages of shipbuilding and outfitting including the setting of the great masts. While it is tempting to attribute the naming of the ship to the earlier engineer and shipbuilder, the New York lawyer was the most likely candidate for gaining the namesake. Nonetheless the coincidence of a Russell commanding a ship by the name *John Wells* is worth at least an appreciative nod, and opens the door to a much larger discussion: the founding structures of the greatest whaling seaport in American history.

Wells built the dock on land leased from Elizabeth Howland (1656-1719), widow of a wealthy landowner, John Howland of Streatham, an early investor in East India Company voyages.² Her daughter Elizabeth (1682-1724), married into the Russell family in 1695. At the time of their marriage, Wriothesley Russell was the 2nd Duke of Bedford making Elizabeth the Duchess of

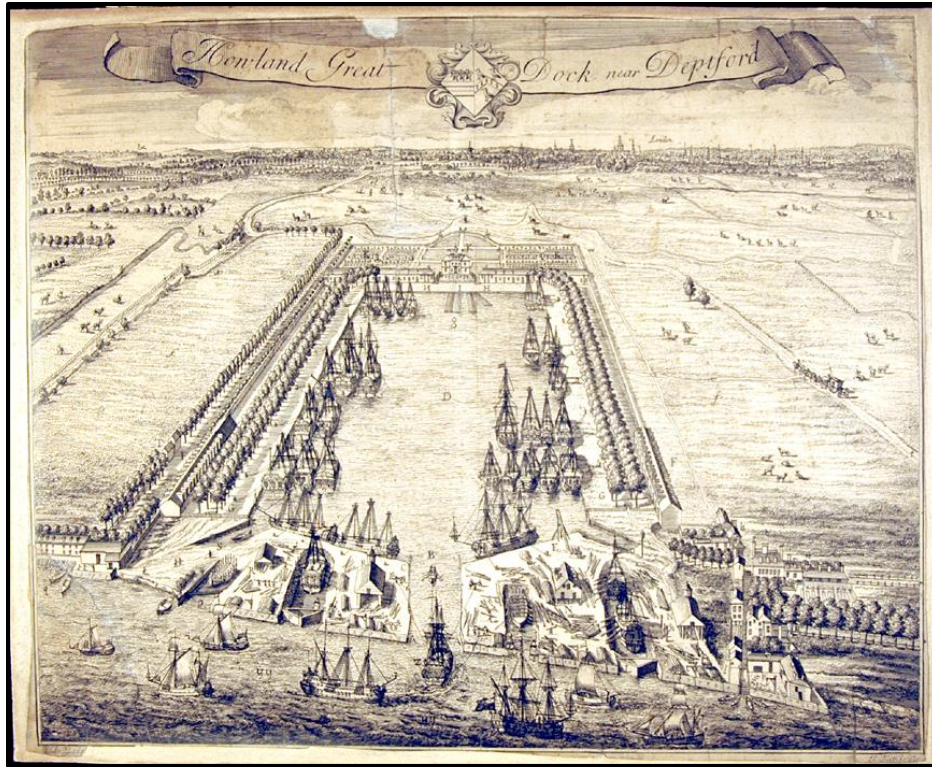


Figure 1 *Howland Great Dock near Deptford, 1720. Engraving on paper by J. Badslade after Johannes Kip. NBWM 2001.100.7390.*

Bedford. She was age 11 and he was age 14 at the time of their marriage. She would die of smallpox at the age of 42. Thus the Howlands and Russells were tied together for all of the 18th century as Elizabeth and Wriothesley had six children all of whom maintained the peerage. Their portraits hang in the family estate Woburn Abbey, Bedfordshire. These relationships between families, ships, and locales, as

possibly demonstrated by the naming of the *John Wells*, held great importance to the maritime culture of the day. The Howland Great Wet Dock enabled the East India Company, and later the British Arctic whaling fleet, to flourish on the Thames River, whether or not this was remembered much later when an American packet ship was named for either the great barrister, or the great shipwright.

Five large East Indiamen ships, all owned by Russell, Duke of Bedford, were built there. Three of the ships, the *Bedford*, the *Russell*, and the *Howland* he hired out to the East India Company.³ It was around this time, in the early years of the 18th century, that Elizabeth Howland began investing in East India Company voyages, along with family members, outside the management protocols of the Company. Her husband's father, Giles Howland, was among the earliest investors in the East India Company, and her own father, Sir Josiah Child, served as both Governor and Deputy Governor of the Company. These family/community investment strategies did not endear her to the Company, but presaged the very business model adopted by the Howlands, Russells, Rotchs, and other whalers of Bedford Village and Nantucket in the American colonies in the mid-18th century. The great success of the American whale fishery depended upon its diverse investment strategies. Every voyage from Nantucket or New Bedford was a unique corporate entity, and while one or two primary investors actually owned the ships, anyone with cash could invest in a voyage. Spreading investment risk, accumulating a great deal of exact knowledge, and employing the best people for the job through personal interviews and

corroborated experience, were all elements of that management. Likewise, entire communities were involved in every aspect of the trade from shipbuilding to banking, sail making to oil refining. In the latter regard, the Americans were much closer to the Dutch who privatized their Arctic whaling adventures, than to the British, who maintained a largely bureaucratic management system for almost their entire whaling history.

The Howland Dock remained on land owned by the Russells until 1763 when the Wells family purchased it. By that time, it had come to be known as the Greenland Dock as it served the London whaling fleet. The London whale fishery had grown to the extent that the huge dock was converted to an oil refinery where the raw blubber from the Greenland whalers could be

processed into oil.⁴ Records indicate that this conversion began in the 1720s. The British whale fishery had only just begun to recover from the disastrous end to its Arctic fishery in the 1630s. The joint stock Muscovy Company ships, under a Royal Charter granted by Queen Elizabeth I in 1577, claimed exclusive rights to hunt whales around Spitsbergen. Several other ports including Yarmouth, Hull, and Whitby, engaged in the Spitsbergen fishery in the 16 teens and 20s clashing, sometimes violently, with the Muscovy Company ships.⁵ After a few bitter years the English Arctic fishery collapsed. The Dutch, who also operated a joint stock whaling company, the Noordshe Company, abandoned the cumbersome business model in the 1640s allowing individual investors the freedom to spread the risk through their community partners. This model, adopted by Elizabeth Howland in her investments, and later by the American whaling agents and owners in their investments, was far more flexible in the uncertain and risky whaling trade.

By 1661, about a decade after the Old Dartmouth Purchase by the Plymouth Colony from the local Wampanoag people, American colonists were just beginning their efforts to build a commercial whale fishery. In those years, shore whalers spotted migrating black whales from lofty headlands and sand dunes and launched their light, double-ended cedar whaleboats of a peculiarly American design into the surf to hunt the passing animals. The six-man crews of these boats commonly employed local Native American men as harpooners, a tradition that continued into the 19th century. Likewise, any animals that stranded or washed ashore dead on the beach were parceled out amongst the local populations especially on the shores of Cape Cod Bay and the coast of Long Island. There was a portion that generally went to the local parish, a portion granted to the finder of the carcass, and a portion that included the ancient Native American Sachem's rights to the fins and flukes. It seems that whales and whaling were one of the few points of more or less amicable relations between the races. For all of that, whaling was so valuable a branch of commerce, incipient as it was in the colonies, that towns appointed inspectors to examine any dead whales, either captured or washed ashore, to make a determination of fair ownership and disposition.⁶

That year, 1661, as the colonists were organizing their lives, 133 Dutch ships with crews numbering 5500 men total were making regular seasonal voyages to the east coast of Greenland

and the Davis Strait as they had for decades.⁷ Whaling was big business and it was soon to be developed in the American colonies. By the 1730s, American sloops were also sailing north to the waters of Davis Strait and the coast of Greenland in the hunt for bowhead whales. While the vessels themselves remained small, sloops and schooners between 40-75 tons, the American fleet grew in the 1750s and 60s, cruising seasonally to the Gulf of St. Lawrence and the old Basque whaling grounds of the Strait of Belle Isle targeting species that produced whale oil and whalebone, namely black and bowhead whales. At this time the American sperm whale fishery also contributed a great deal of blubber oil and head matter, a unique contribution to the whaling economy of the British colonies, and the foundation of highly specialized whaling ports like Nantucket and Bedford Village.

Henry Elking (fl. 1720s), an entrepreneur who envisaged a new British “Greenland Company” as a means to balance the whale oil and bone trade deficit with the Netherlands, undertook a revival of the British Arctic whaling fleet in 1722. His scheme failed, largely because he operated it as a joint stock venture under the umbrella of the South Sea Company dependent upon being subsidized by the Crown and the voyages simply did not return enough to cover the company’s debts. Nonetheless, the Greenland Dock had become a center for British oil production. Much of that oil was beginning to be imported to London from the American colonies.

As Muscovy Company ships plied the whale-rich waters of the North Atlantic, and East India Company ships rounded the Cape of Good Hope on voyages to India and the “Spice Islands,” European voyages of exploration to North America in the late 16th and early 17th centuries would produce enough knowledge of the lands of Virginia and New England to attempt colonization.⁸ Among the first separatist settlers at the Plymouth Colony in 1620 was John Howland (1592-1672). John’s ancestry separated from Elizabeth’s although both were descended from the same progenitor, “John Howland of London, gentleman, citizen and salter,” born around 1515.⁹ John’s brother Henry (?-1671) who arrived in the colony a year or two after John was among the original purchasers of Dartmouth, and his descendants came to settle the old farm at Round Hill, and elsewhere in the region. Most were staunch Quakers.

John Russell (1608-1695) would emigrate from England to the colonies, settle in Marshfield, convert to Quakerism, and become the forebear of Joseph Russell who founded Bedford Village on the banks of the Acushnet River in 1765. His relationship, if any, to the Russells of the Bedford peerage remains unknown. In any case, the Howlands and Russells of Dartmouth formed a tight-knit clan, and one that was mirrored in London.

Gideon Howland’s maternal grandmother, Mary Russell, was a granddaughter of John Russell and his wife Dorothy, the progenitors of the numerous Russells of Dartmouth. This family, like the Howlands, played a prominent part in the history of the town. Judith, Gideon’s sister, and Rebecca, his daughter, each married a Russell, and there were frequent intermarriages with Russells among the descendants of Gideon, and indeed among other Howlands of various generations.¹⁰

Joseph Russell (1719-1804), owned extensive lands in Dartmouth. He founded a port on the banks of the Acushnet River specifically intending to pursue the whale fishery. In *The Howland Heirs*, Emery noted that “he was likewise an importer of English goods.” Of course maritime trade from Massachusetts at the time was almost entirely between Great Britain and her colonial holdings, but as is very well documented from New Bedford merchants’ letterbooks of the late 18th century, trade connections could be considerable amongst individuals and often followed patterns of kinship or other close association of friends. When Joseph Rotch moved from Nantucket to the village, “he suggested that the village... be named Bedford, in honor of Mr. Russell, who bore the family name of the Duke of Bedford.”¹¹ It is said that the names of the village was changed to New Bedford as there was already a town of Bedford in Massachusetts. While that may well be true, given the relationships between the founding families of the place, *New Bedford* was perhaps the best possible name for a seaport with aspirations to greatness.

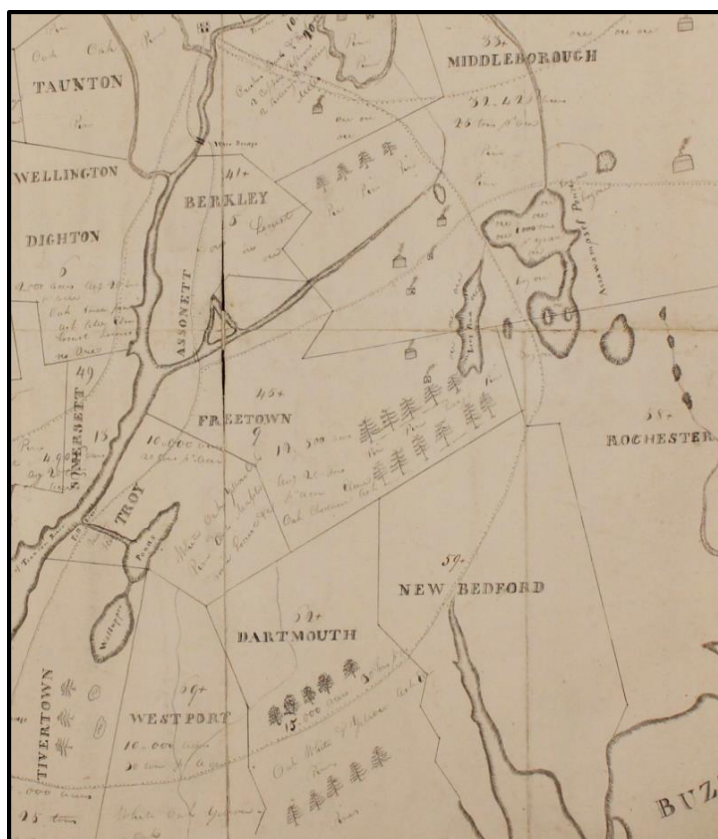


Figure 2 Charcoal Production Map for southeastern Massachusetts and Rhode Island, circa 1802. Pencil on paper, NBWM library collection.

Among the great ironies of this story is that the first full-rigged ship built at Bedford Village was the ship *Dartmouth*. Built to the order of Joseph Rotch in 1767, and managed by his son Francis, the *Dartmouth* was famously involved in the “affair of the tea,” in Boston Harbor in 1773. The tea, of course, belonged to the East India Company, thus, the port of Dartmouth in the UK where the Pilgrim travelers put into to repair the *Mayflower* en route to found a new colony in New England had its namesake directly involved in an act of rebellion against the crown. The settlers of the village where the *Dartmouth* was built were among the original managers of the East India Company itself! Later chickens would come home thoroughly to roost in 1783, as the first ship to fly the Stars and Stripes of the newly minted United States of America was the ship *Bedford* of Nantucket.

As the ancient Muscovy Company and East India Company trade networks extended both into the Russian north as well as the Indian Ocean and beyond, so too did New Bedford’s later merchants’ connections. If William Rotch, Jr. was buying iron from Sweden and hemp from St.

Petersburg in the 1790s that was merely a continuation of a trade trajectory dating back hundreds of years. Russia and Sweden produced the best timber, naval stores, hemp, charcoal, and iron for shipbuilding before Americans began truly producing such quality materials at home. Of course the American colonists did things to the land that the native people living there never did. Metallurgy is a good example. Massachusetts settlers by the end of the 18th century produced tons of charcoal from the surrounding woodlands and by building forges, furnaces, and foundries processed bog iron ore from the local lakes and streams into usable metals. This was an entirely separate use of the land to anything that had happened here for thousands of years previous. It alone serves as a stark separation confronting Old World settlers in the New World. These cultures were, literally, worlds apart in every way.

It is tempting to imagine colonial North America as a stand-alone experience. Voyages of exploration “discovered” America, and in so doing encouraged stalwart pioneers to penetrate the unknown and stumble around in the dark for a while with little cultural context behind them while they developed into a people crafted out of whole cloth. Far beyond such a simplistic assessment is the maritime culture into which the colonies were born. Settlers did not simply arrive here and that is the end of the story. There was a great deal of traffic back and forth across the North Atlantic and south to the West Indies, and even to the coast of Africa and the Mediterranean. This traffic dates to the 16th century. The new colonies were simply either an added stop along the way or a point of embarkation where newly exploited raw materials were becoming increasingly available.

Whaling is an excellent example. The English had pursued whaling in the North Sea from the third quarter of the 16th century. Queen Elizabeth’s charter to the Muscovy Company proves beyond a doubt that whaling was a part of the plan and vision of that maritime nation from a date long preceding the settlement of colonial New England. Once settled, the religious strife both in England and in the colonies drove some settlers to the seaside margins of the colonies. That Long Island and Cape Cod should prove, within 50 years of carving out Western communities in a land already inhabited by other people, to be conducive to whale hunting, only serves to demonstrate both the market drive and the sophistication of the colonists once they had established themselves. It is notable that the real commercial production of the colonials post-dated King Philips War of 1675. Much that made the settlement of New England a cross-cultural novelty, where real issues of land, its ownership, its management, and the tensions endemic in an invasion of one culture by another culture (which was itself by no means homogenous), created a dynamic quite stark in its before-and-after effects. The continuity of the maritime structure underlying that dynamic is wonderfully glimpsed in the naming of “New Bedford.” The place grew out of long-standing English family relationships based on English maritime trade. The freedom that seaborne trade cultivated in New England (and elsewhere in the colonies as well,) brought with it a sense of entitlement on the part of American seaport merchants, but, in so doing, that determination grew New Bedford into one of the great seaports of the world by the 1850s.

ENDNOTES

¹ The significance of a Russell commanding the *John Wells* will become clear shortly.

² A.W. Skempton, et al. *A Biographical Dictionary of Civil Engineers in Great Britain and Ireland, Vol. 1, 1500-1830* (London, 2002), p. 769. The East India Company was formed in 1600 to compete with the Dutch and Portuguese in the spice trade with Asia.

³ Margot Finn and Kate Smith, *The East India Company at Home, 1757-1857* (London, 2018), p.55.

⁴ Stuart Rankin, *A Short History of the Surrey Commercial Docks*. Rotherhithe Local History Paper #6 (London, 1991).

⁵ These individual ports, along with several ports in Scotland attempted a more entrepreneurial management system to their whaling efforts, but remained indebted, legally and physically well into the 19th century, to the Crown which subsidized them.

⁶ Alexander Starbuck, *History of the American Whale Fishery* (Waltham, MA, 1878), pp. 8-9.

⁷ Cornelis de Jong, *A Short History of Old Dutch Whaling* (Pretoria, 1978), p. 39.

⁸ In 1577, the same year that Elizabeth I granted the Muscovy Company a charter to hunt whales, Sir Francis Drake sailed from Plymouth to circumnavigate the globe.

⁹ Edwin M. Stone, *The Life and Recollections of John Howland, Late President of the Rhode Island Historical Society* (Providence, 1857), p. introduction.

¹⁰ William M. Emery, *The Howland Heirs* (New Bedford, 1919), p. 15.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 18.